

What makes a good day on placement?

Introduction

Clinical placement is an essential part of radiography education, providing students with the opportunity to apply theory to practice (1). The experience a student has whilst on placement can have an effect on their perceptions of the profession (2). A negative experience may contribute to students withdrawing from their course (3). Clinical placement experience can also influence a student's choices for future employment (4). It is therefore essential to provide an effective clinical placement to reduce attrition and retain radiographers.

Literature is available evaluating clinical placements. However, as highlighted in a critical narrative review across all health professions, the students' voice is limited within published research in relation to their experience (5). One large study identified the clinical instructor as the main influencing factor in nursing student satisfaction with clinical placement (6). Similarly, a survey of nursing and psychology students showed supervisor characteristics having a significant impact on placement (7). Role models are important for shaping a student's future. A study by Conway found radiographers identified as approachable and student focussed are selected as role models. A focus group of radiography students, highlighted that confidence can be easily knocked by negative comments (8). Coping strategies for reducing anxiety during a clinical placement, gathered via an online survey of 58 student nurses experiences have been identified as; talking, being positive and active, and asking questions (1). Hyde (8) suggests good student support reduces uncertainty in clinical placement and boosts confidence. The importance of student support is recognised, and across Europe mechanisms are in place to select, train and support clinical supervisors (9).

In order to facilitate a positive placement experience, the aim of this paper is to explore what makes a good day on placement for diagnostic radiography students.

Methodology

This paper discusses data collected over two consecutive years with diagnostic radiography students from one Higher Education Institution towards the end of their second year.

Institutional ethical approval was not sought because it was undertaken as a classroom activity, exploring qualitative research methodology using critical incident technique and thematic qualitative data analysis. Ethical issues were considered, students were provided with a participant information sheet and requested to sign a consent form for their data to be included. Being mindful of the lecturer/student relationship data was collected anonymously without coercion (10). Students were informed of the possibility of dissemination of the information and allowed to remove any of their data. Critical incident technique, developed by Flanagan (11) is a way of collecting accounts of direct observation and perceptions. For this study, students were requested to document what makes a good day on placement and what makes a bad day on placement. Thematic analysis of data was undertaken by the student participants. Initially they were asked to look for patterns, or themes. These emerging common issues were then discussed in order to interpret the data and explore meaning. This reflective group process reduced the influence of the lecturer and maximised the validity of the findings (12). Students were free to choose whether to be a participant or an observer of the exercise. To alleviate any negative impact of the activity, debriefing took place towards the end of the sessions and students were reminded of available student support (10). There were 29 participants in the first year and 18 in the following year. The combined data is discussed under the following themes; environment, staff, patients and students. Themes and subthemes can be seen in figures 1 to 4. Initial quotes summarise the essence of the theme.

Findings

Environment

“When working on a bank holiday, so no other students were there and not many radiographers so had lots to do and felt like I was part of the team.”

Environment



There were several comments about liking a steady work flow of work. This quote sums it up.

“When department is steady e.g. not too busy or too quiet, that way you’re not bored but not stressed either and the day goes faster.”

The worst thing about busy days is that qualified staff take over in order to get through the workload. There are other comments about the environment being stressful, feeling they were rushing the examinations, also that it allowed no opportunity for assessments. It is considered a bad day if they miss breaks due to the department being busy.

“A busy department (as radiographers feel stressed. Then do the examinations as they are quicker).”

Students feel the effects when staff are under pressure. Several noted that it contributes to a good day when *“staff are relaxed and not under pressure.”*

Shortages of staff can impact on students learning in different ways. In being able to take and review the images, and providing feedback.

“Shortage of staff, unable to give you time to go through images.”

“Your image being sent off before you even get to see it!”

“Radiographers too busy to write comments/ do assessments.”

Slow, slack days were also considered to be bad.

“When it is really quiet and the day goes slowly.”

The number of students in an area can impact on the experience.

“When the department is full of students and you can’t get in to do any X-rays.”

“When several year groups plus APs are in and the department is very busy.”

Students like interesting, challenging cases. Times when they are learning something new, or being challenged. They also like working in different areas and doing different things such as spending time with a reporting radiographer.

“Working in different modalities and speaking to different radiographers.”

The repetitiveness of the role is highlighted as contributing to a bad day.

“Fracture clinic and you get repetitive examinations.”

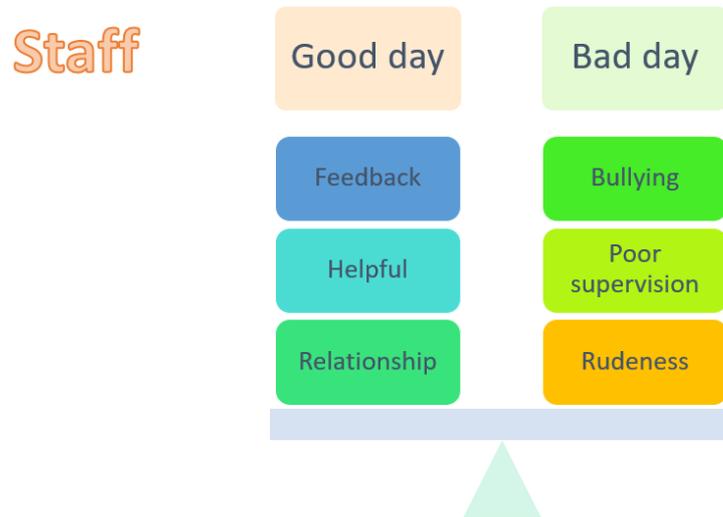
“In outpatient room all day for ?OA.”

Students like to feel part of the team. They want to be involved in the examinations and it is viewed as positive to be asked by the radiographer for their assistance when required. However, they do not like to feel that they are doing the majority of the examinations, or other work.

“Feeling part of the team, not just ‘the student’ - feel like friends.”

Staff

"A good day would be working with people who are friendly and approachable, who are happy to help you and explain things when you need it."



Words used to describe staff members that contribute to a good day include, nice, helpful, friendly, relaxed, supportive and approachable.

"Good staff - friendly/willing to work with you and give you some independence/ willing to do some assessments/ people that actually know your name."

"Working with people who are helpful, friendly and good to learn from."

Receiving feedback is an important part of the learning process. Students appreciate staff who take time to provide feedback.

"Working with radiographers who spend time explaining different examinations, who are friendly and have patience with students."

"Being praised for doing well and being told you don't know your own strengths."

"Radiographers taking time to explain stuff to me."

The type of feedback is important as highlighted by this negative comment, *"not constructive, just criticism."*

Supervision can impact on the student experience

“Who you are working with - poor attitudes can bring you down and knock your confidence.”

Having some degree of independence is important. Students want to feel trusted to complete an examination with supervision which they perceive to be not too close. It was mentioned that working out of hours enables more independence.

“Radiographers who let me do the examination in full and don’t come in and take over.”

It contributes to a bad day when students feel *“not trusted to do simple things”* or are supervised by radiographers who *“sit on your shoulder for every X-ray”*.

Strong words are used to describe people who contribute to a bad day, including; rude, belittling, patronising, impatient and unapproachable. One student’s perception of their experience is concerning.

“When a radiographer spent a whole examination humiliating me and I hid in the changing room and cried.”

This is not an isolated case of a student being reduced to tears.

“A reporting radiographer made me cry after I went to get an X-ray checked for another member of staff - I hadn’t done the examination.”

Students want to feel valued and recognised as a person. This is particularly highlighted by not being referred to by name.

“When radiographers call you student and not by your name.”

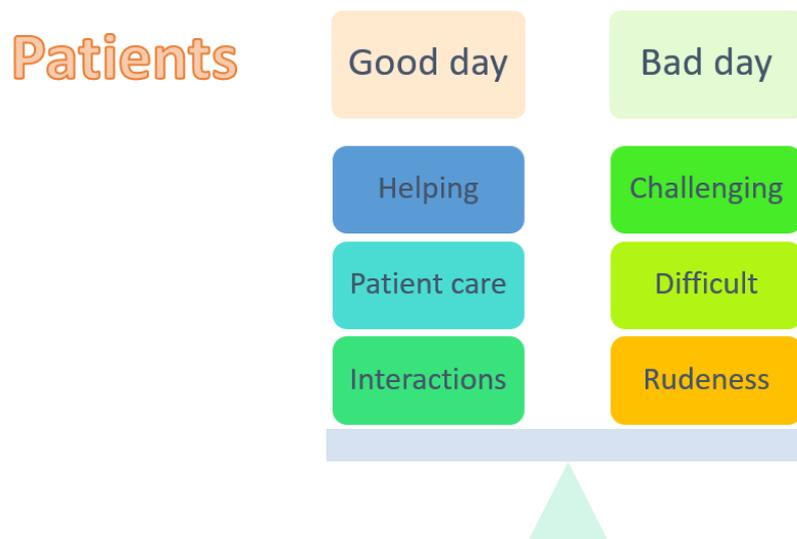
“Being called student, not my name.”

They want to work with people who are interested in them so they are not *“feeling like a spare part,”* as this impacts negatively on their learning.

“Spending a day with dis-interested supervisors and feeling that I don’t learn anything new.”

Patients

"Making patients smile."



Having cooperative patients contributes to a good day. Other characteristics include nice, friendly and polite. Students are rewarded by positive interactions with their patients.

"Building rapport with a patient and making their experience better."

They value the *"ability to deliver a good care service"* and find it *"self-rewarding, it feels good helping others."*

Not surprisingly patients who contribute to a bad day are described as difficult, rude, awkward and uncooperative.

"Awkward patients on trollies who can't co-operate and make things 10x harder for you."

However, producing good quality diagnostic images, especially in challenging circumstances is rewarding.

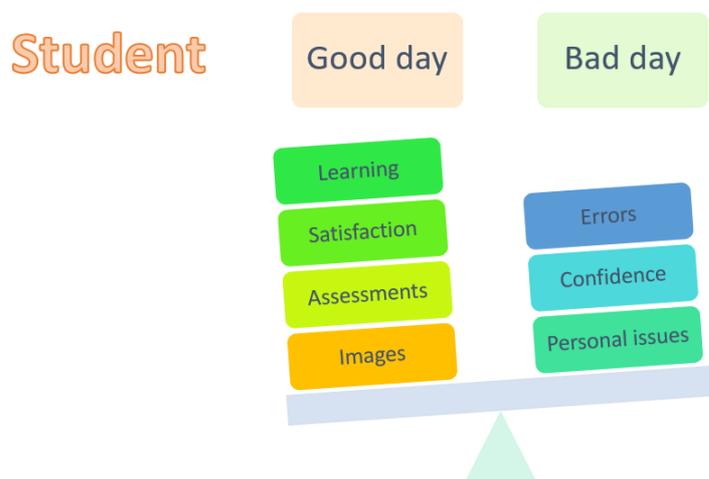
"Doing good images with adaptive technique with a challenging patient, no repeats."

There were comments about it being nice to feel appreciated.

"Someone (patient or staff member) being grateful for your help."

Students

"Having a good knee day!"



A satisfying day occurs when students learn something new. Some like to be challenged for example *"image interpretation with a supervisor"*.

Completing and passing assessments and receiving positive feedback is perceived as good.

"When you pass an assessment that you've been putting off for weeks."

"Positive feedback from supervising radiographers."

"When I receive positive comments regarding my competency."

Students have bad days *"when you can't seem to get anything right"*. Producing sub-optimal images and *"messing up"* contribute to a bad day.

"Getting everything wrong, images not how I thought."

"When images don't turn out how you expect. Having to repeat."

It can impact negatively on the day if mistakes are made.

"when you keep missing off bits of anatomy."

"When I make a mistake, or forget something important."

Everyday stressors affect the day, such as public transport and buses being late. According to one student, a good day on placement can occur if you...

“get to placement nice and early with enough rest to feel physically and mentally ready for the day ahead.”

Food is a recurring theme for contributing to a good day. Early lunch, free food, nice packed lunch, and snacks. There are other niceties mentioned such as *“Sweetie Friday”*. It is appreciated when...

“one of the seniors brings chocolate on a Friday when he is in charge.”

Discussion

Placement experience is vital to students learning (5). However, providing student placements is difficult for both imaging departments and for universities. Students like to learn and be challenged whilst on placement and it is essential for the development of their skills. A good day is a *“steady flow of patients, not mad busy, not dead.”* This study is not alone in identifying an overcrowding of students as being a problem. A phenomenological study conducted in Turkey with 14 second year nursing students identified clinics being crowded with students impacting negatively on their learning (13). The busyness of the environment can also impact on the student experience as staff tend to take over and perform tasks themselves (14).

It is important to manage student numbers and rotations effectively, ideally being introduced to new experiences. A lack of variety was viewed as negative, doing the *“same examination all day, particularly awkward ones.”* Being in the same area, seeing routine examinations is also an issue for student nurses (13) and highlighted in a survey of 152 first year students from the areas of occupational, physical, speech and language therapy (15). However, moving around to different areas can be challenging for radiography students and impact negatively on their sense of belonging (3).

The ability to mentor students is a core characteristic of a supervisor on placement (7). Second year nursing students from Turkey identified the importance of the supervisors and their ways of communication had particular impact (7). Being asked too many questions, being questioned in front of patients and not receiving effective feedback were viewed as

negative (13). Feedback on performance is important for development (16). It is linked to learner's motivation, self-esteem and ultimately improvement in clinical practice (16). A mixed methods study with radiography students highlights the complexity around feedback (16). Students in this study expressed the desire for feedback to be specific, meaningful and constructive. Perceptions of favouritism and only critical feedback can impact negatively (16).

An environment which is welcoming can contribute to a positive placement experience (15). Students value feeling welcomed and wanted, of belonging, and embraced as part of the team. Feelings of belonging are essential for mental health and well-being (17). An extensive project in the United States implies that, due to this relationship, efforts to promote a positive welcoming experience for students will ultimately impact on patient care (17). Just being acknowledged by staff members can make students feel more comfortable in the clinical environment (18)(19). These findings mirror an earlier survey showing students wanting to feel accepted, included and have a connection to the staff in their placement (20). Unwelcoming and uncomfortable was a theme in the qualitative study by Mifsud, Castillo and Portelli (14). Feelings exacerbated by students not knowing the staff and the staff generally not introducing themselves or explaining what happens (14). The radiography students reported feeling excluded from conversations. This study, as that by Brady et al. (2) highlights the importance of staff welcoming and appreciating contributions the student makes, instilling in them the feeling of being a valued team member.

Clinical placements can be stressful and challenging, both with staff and patients (21). Performance anxiety and being anxious not to make mistakes was raised as an issue in this study, similar to the finding of a focus group with first year children's nursing students (2). Students need to be mentally prepared for placement, strategies for coping, developing resilience, and relationship building may all help (21). In addition to clinical challenges, a survey in 2010 found that one third of the radiography student responding reported being bullied (SOR, 2010). Bullying should never occur, but the reality of the situation cannot be avoided. Surveys across Australia (n=833) and the UK (n=561), in South Africa (n=888) and New Zealand (n= 296) using a questionnaire designed to explore student experience of bullying during a clinical placement, found that staff were consistently mentioned as

perpetrators of bullying(22)(23)(24). The idea of being unjustly treated or humiliated causes anxiety for students coping in a new work placement (22). One literature review highlights that positive staff relationships, and a caring environment can promote resilience (25). Resilience is not a stagnant characteristic, which suggests that it can be learned (26). Social interactions aid development of resilience (6)(26). It has been suggested that social media can be used to facilitate this, particularly when used as a platform to develop relationships with peers and clinical staff (6)(21).

Radiographers can act as positive role models for students (14). A supervisor that enjoys teaching, one who provides effective learning strategies can contribute to a positive placement experience (15). A mixed methods study with first year radiography students found that some clinical staff are more willing to help students than others (3). A questionnaire with radiography students in Nigeria concluded that students had a pleasant learning experience and found staff willing and available to assist (27). Similarly, a qualitative study of student nurses in a community-based placement in Australia perceived the nurses to be genuinely interested and investing time in ensuring a worthwhile placement experience (28). These findings suggest bullying in clinical placement is linked to the culture within the organisation.

Conclusion

Clinical placement is something that all radiographers have experienced. This paper adds to existing knowledge by discussing points to consider when supervising students. Primarily they like to learn and be challenged whilst on placement and it is essential for the development of their skills. It is important to manage student numbers and rotations effectively. Ideally, so that they can be introduced to new experiences. This study highlights the importance of supervisors, there is a desire for feedback to be specific, meaningful and constructive. Students value feeling welcomed and wanted, of belonging, and embraced as part of the team. They value the ability to deliver a good service and find helping others is self-rewarding. Treats always help make a day feel good.

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CPD

Reflect on your time as a student, what were the positive and negative aspects?

Consider the students in your department. What can you do to enhance their experience?

Reflect on your relationship with students you supervise? Do you know the names of students you work with?